

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 18, 2011

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As President Hu Jintao arrives in the United States, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) releases its recent letter to President Obama urging him to “clearly speak” about why religious freedom is in the interest of U.S.-China relations.

“We are encouraged that President Obama has said human rights would be a major part of his discussion with President Hu, the Administration needs to become a more prominent voice for the voiceless and vulnerable in China,” said Leonard Leo, USCIRF Chair. “However, private conversations alone will not move this rising power to change its policies. After the summit ends, the Administration must demonstrate that it believes respect for religious freedom and related human rights is a fundamental strategic interest and integrate this understanding into its overall China policy.”

President Obama met last week with prominent China experts and human rights advocates. The President and Secretary of State Clinton both stated that human rights, including religious freedom, would be a prominent part of their discussions with President Hu.

In its 2010 Annual Report, USCIRF offered several recommendations for better pursuing a government-wide human rights strategy with China. Among other recommendations, USCIRF urged the Administration to:

- fully employ the tools specified in the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) for countries designated as “countries of particular concern” (CPCs), including sanctions or some other commensurate action, and cease the practice of relying on pre-existing sanctions that do not address specific religious freedom abuses, by issuing a new presidential action focusing on either state agencies or actors who perpetuate religious freedom abuses or on provinces or localities where religious freedom conditions are most egregious;
- develop a human rights strategy towards China that engages and utilizes the entire U.S. government by creating an inter-agency human rights action plan and coordinating its implementation across all U.S. government agencies and entities, including developing targeted talking points and prisoner lists and providing staffing and support for all U.S. delegations visiting China; and
- reinvigorate a process of multilateral cooperation on human rights and technical assistance programs with allies who conduct bilateral human rights dialogues with China.

Within the planning and structure of the Strategic and Economic Dialogue, the U.S.

government should:

- prioritize human rights and religious freedom issues as principal issues in the Strategic Dialogue's agenda; raise a full range of religious freedom concerns in high-level discussions in each session and seek binding agreements on key religious freedom and human rights concerns at the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue in ways similar to other economic and security interests; and
- ensure that religious freedom priorities raised in the Strategic Dialogue are implemented through appropriate U.S. government foreign assistance programs on such issues as legal reform, civil society capacity-building, public diplomacy, and cultural and religious preservation and exchanges.

January 14, 2011

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write today on behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to convey our appreciation for your recent statement condemning the violence in Egypt and Nigeria, as well as to urge you to raise religious freedom issues during the visit of Chinese President Hu Jintao.

The Commission has followed events in Egypt and Nigeria for many years. We welcomed your call for the attackers in Egypt to be "brought to justice for this barbaric and heinous act." The Commission has found that in Egypt serious problems of discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims, remain widespread. The past year marked a significant upsurge in violence targeting

Coptic Orthodox Christians. In Nigeria, the government continues to respond inadequately and ineffectively to recurrent communal and sectarian violence. Years of inaction by Nigeria's federal, state and local governments has created a climate of impunity, resulting in thousands of deaths, which is why USCIRF recommended Nigeria be named a "country of particular concern" under the International Religious Freedom Act. Sustained engagement by the United States on both of these issues will be critical.

Mr. President, your remarks on the violence against religious minorities in Egypt and Nigeria helped to underscore the importance of making international freedom of religion a priority. Hopefully, you will have occasion at the State of the Union or some other forum to speak to these countries again and reinforce the idea that religious extremism must be combated both by bringing offenders to justice and eliminating discriminatory and repressive state laws that stoke the flames of intolerance.

As you prepare to meet with President Hu Jintao next week, we respectfully urge you to speak publicly about why religious freedom is in China's interest, rooted in international human rights treaties and standards which China has affirmed. In the past, USCIRF welcomed your eloquent statements before the U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue about why religious freedom is an important American interest, fundamental to our nation's history. We hope you will use this opportunity with Chinese leaders to detail the tangible diplomatic, political, social welfare, security, and economic benefits China can gain by fully protecting and promoting religious freedom and related human rights, and also explain the costs of continued repression and religious freedom abuses to the future growth and flexibility of U.S.-China relations.

The U.S. cannot ignore China's continued repression of dissent in the hopes of finding common ground on other important global concerns. U.S. policy and statements should reflect the fact that human rights protections and the advancement of the rule of law are critically intertwined with many of our national interests with China. The Commission would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you these and other issues.

Sincerely,
Leonard Leo
Chair

CC: Samantha Power, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights
Jeff Bader, Senior Director for East Asia
Michelle Gavin, Senior Director for Africa
Sergio Aguirre, Director for Levant and North Africa
Joshua DuBois, Executive Director of the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

[Click here to view the pdf version of the letter.](#)

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Anu Vakkalanka, Communications Specialist at mnarasimhan@uscirf.gov, or (202) 786-0610.